

## UNTO YOU A CHILD

Christmas is not the celebration of Jesus' birth – it is the celebration of His COMING. Christmas is more than a birthday party – cake and ice cream and presents, all very pleasant to be sure. That may be a good place to start with children when they are four or five or six. But hopefully we don't leave them at that level – or ourselves either.

I am not trying to start any controversy with what happens “out there.” I know Christmas is a grand national and international festival. It's fine for it to be as meaningful and as much fun as possible, for as many as possible. But in here – that is, inside the church itself – we are supposed to know more than that.

His COMING is more than Happy Birthday. It is the coming of Messiah, the Christ – Incarnation: God coming to earth in the form of a man. And in the mystery and terror of how that is possible – and how much that is possible – all our definitions, expectations, hopes, and dreams are imploded or exploded. You can never look in the mirror again and see “mere human,” because the Christ of God calls you brother or sister. You can never think it will be over soon, because He is resurrected. You can never be content that you have done all things well or right, because He has such strange and awesome standards. And you can never count yourself out, because this One keeps healing the most terrible wounds and giving us brand-new chances out of the blackest pits we can dig.

No, it is not some neat little kindergarten package, all cut-and-dried, with Christmas at one end and Easter at the other – as if we could find a beginning or an end to this business. Easter is not the end; it is fantastic new beginnings – *endless* new beginnings. And Christmas is shot-through with Easter, and with the full impact of all that His COMING has meant and done. Christmas carries it all: fulfillment; fullness of time; Incarnation; “*Mine eyes have seen Thy salvation.*” (Luke 2:30) Of course, the secular world keeps trying to reduce it down to something more safe and manageable – like a birthday party. Just think about the baby and the birth; never mind who He really is, what He does, why He came, or how He changes life. After all, if you let some of the meaning in, you can no longer stay secular, now can you?

The dichotomy is always with us. Christmas is very different depending on whether you see it from “out there” or from “in here.” That is, whether you celebrate it as part of a faith family, as a member of the body of Christ – something you are part of, an integral part of your destiny – or whether you celebrate it as just a custom and tradition of the culture around you, a pleasant holiday that happens this time of year. Please do not misunderstand; I think the secular Christmas is an incredible event. Can you imagine trying to talk our nation into celebrating Christmas if we were coming from scratch, with no heritage or tradition or underlying spiritual meaning? Suppose we had no Christmas and you were a member of a large sales-force whose purpose it was to sell Christmas to our nation. It would be good for the economy; it would bring families closer together; it would be good for the level of caring and affection, at least for many people. Can you imagine the response if we had to sell Christmas from scratch? If we hadn’t grown up seeing it happen every year, we would say point-blank that it was absolutely impossible.

Think of the energy it requires, for instance, and the planning and the imagination it takes to decorate so many homes from coast to coast. To contemplate the amount of generosity that goes into each year’s Christmas celebrations is staggering. Can you imagine starting out from scratch to convince people that they should participate in all this giving and cooperation and coordination? The notion is clearly ludicrous. People might smile to think about it, but you could never talk them into actually trying it. The whole affair is far too idealistic, far too impractical, and so full of incredibly difficult problems – like manufacturing, transportation, distribution, organization, promotion. I mean, the idea is nice, but there is no way we could manage it. Can you imagine the endless meetings – and all the sane, practical objections – if we were trying to sell Christmas?

And yet our nation actually does it every year. Christmas Day is a wonderful parable, and we act it out every year. The question is: Will we catch on to the message of the parable some year and turn our world around? The answer, of course, is no. That would be impractical and impossible. But then, Christmas Day itself is impractical and impossible. Maybe someday that truth will dawn, and we will stretch Christmas from a day into a WAY of Life. Is that not what some of us poignantly mention every December 26th?

“What do you do for a living?” “Oh, I make Christmas presents. I take the gifts and the resources I have and turn them into deeds and services and creations of love. I do it for others in honor of Christ.” You see, we are not really very far from it already, in many situations. It lacks only the vision and the consistency and the faith. On the other hand, that is quite a lot of lack! It misses the core of it – the meaning and the power. We always want to substitute bootstraps and muscle for the Christ, so we can stay in control. But that misses the Christ, who changes us from within. It misses our being born over again. A new world requires new people. Toys and lights and tinsel and music and friendliness are never quite enough, no matter how hard we try. It requires, in the old language, a Savior.

Oh, there is no way to escape it, is there? Christmas is the most insulting day of the year. That is exactly why it is so full of hope. The message of Christmas is that things are not right and we are not whole. The message is that normal days and normal people are not good enough. We are not going to make it this way. We, together with our brothers and sisters everywhere, make the world what it is – and the world is not right yet. It needs to be changed. That is what Christmas shouts from every decoration and carol and gift. But it is not just the usual call to buck-up, or try harder, or blame somebody else, or go hang our heads in shame. The Savior, in love, has come to help us with the changing. That hope is so huge, we do not much mind the insult.

Well, we *do* mind the insult, and we do everything we can, at first, to rework Christmas into something less offensive. It is a universal human trait that we do not like to admit our need. That is precisely the problem we have with Christmas: admitting our need. We don't mind *wanting* something, but we hate to *need* something – even God. God's Christmas present to us is hard to take. The greater the gift, the greater the insult – and the larger the hope. God's present to us is very great, and very costly. “*Unto you a child is born ....*” (Isaiah 9:6) “*For to you is born this day ... a Savior ....*”

Can you picture someone opening this true Christmas package, expectancy and hope on their face – until the wrapping is off? Then: “I give up. What is it? A Savior? Hmmm ... How does it work? What is it good for? What do I do with it? Where can I exchange it for something I really want?”

I ask you: Is that what you want for Christmas? Is that what you think you really need – a Savior? Even after all these generations, the central meaning of Christmas still sounds a little strange, does it not? When we already have so much, how can we find the humility to admit that our need is still so great?

If Christmas means anything at all, it means that we and our world are in great need. It does not primarily have anything to do with wealth or position. Too many people live without meaning, without purpose, without goals worth having. Too many lives are joyless, without self, without soul. Too many people fear the loss of every tiny outward possession because the emptiness within is still so vast and painful. Too many people have killed their dreams and gone adventureless into the ruts and dead-ends that we call “security.” Yes, I do put it exceedingly mildly, as every day’s newspaper makes plain. And onto this bleak scene comes the great gift: Merry Christmas ... Merry LIFE. *“I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly.”*

A Savior to save us from what? **Sin**, of course – alienation, loneliness, emptiness. **Death** – which comes in many forms, none of which we have power over all by ourselves; all who really die, die before death takes them. And **Satan** – though many of you only dimly believe he exists, or you think you are quite competent to deal with him all by yourself.

Christmas is the invitation – from the God who made us – to live according to the integrity and eternity that God has put within us: joy; creativity; a value on your life; a purpose you will not stray from; a talent you will not defile. But the world considered it a terrible insult to be told that it needed a Savior. Savior indeed! Oh yes, the world was very polite about it on the surface, just as it still is every Christmas season – for that is the way of the world. It acted pleased and honored and humble and all. But from the very beginning, you could tell there was deep resentment underneath.

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## UNTO YOU A CHILD

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Dear World,

Have been watching your progress with avid interest for lo these many generations. While much that I see is reminiscent of the true design, it has become increasingly obvious that there is much confusion about the real purpose of life, and a nearly total blank-out regarding the method and availability of real love. It is harder for you than ONE would expect, considering the evidence I keep making available. I have had to conclude that you need dramatic and conclusive help.

Please accept this gift as an expression of my continued, deep, and abiding love. It will give you what you now lack.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

God

Dear God,

Thank you for your thoughtful concern. While recognizing the expense you have gone to, we are a little surprised and – if we may say so – a little hurt to learn that your evaluation of our progress is so negative.

From our point of view, we are doing quite well and consider your gift unnecessary and inappropriate. Your latest expert, while he may be well-trained and highly qualified, has done nothing but upset our procedures, disturb time-honored truth and patterns of behavior, and get everybody all in a lather.

Consequently, we are returning your gift, postage-paid, and we sincerely hope that, in the future, you will allow us to handle our problems in our own way.

HAVE A GOOD FRIDAY.

Earth

Dear World,

I had, of course, suspected this would be your reaction, though I was hoping all along that it would not come to this. No doubt it was inevitable. The greater the gift, the more likely its rejection. So be it. Your insolence has mounted, as the resources I gave you have been discovered and developed. More and more, you destroy and corrupt my world and the souls I plant there.

All right! If it is war you want, it is war you shall have. The Spirit of Him you slew shall be my army. He will strike your friends and steal your children. Without mark or sound, He shall come and conquer, and those He touches will be filled with a LIFE you cannot fathom. They will break your systems and storm your structures, and you will find no defense against them. You yourselves will never be safe, for He will ever be among you – to convert and to redeem.

You have killed my SON, and you think it's all over? **Don't you know who I AM?!** I send Him back. Now try to stop Him! The tomb you sealed is empty.

HAPPY EASTER.

God

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There is an old Persian proverb: “God’s club makes no noise. When it strikes, there is no cure for the blow.” So it is, also, with God’s love.

So there is the drama and the reality of the true Christmas. But the world is beguiled by the humility and meekness and beauty of it. So it celebrates THE COMING of the One who will change it forever. The lights and the trees and the presents are only a “front.” Behind Christmas is the most powerful force for change and transformation in the universe. Kicking and screaming and fighting all the way, we are being dragged inexorably into joy and love and eternal LIFE. “Ain’t it awful?” Strangely enough, much of the time, we really think it is.

Either that, or we receive – with the humility of famished souls, with heartfelt praise and gratitude – we receive the LIFE of the One whom no cross could frighten and no death could hold. That is the story that unfolds endlessly from the birth of this baby.

*“Unto you a child is born ....”*